

# The Federal Diary

## Deadly Gas Found At Post Office Site



By  
**Mike  
Causey**

Construction of a half-finished \$130 million mail-processing factory in the New Jersey swamplands has bogged down, because government engineers have just discovered it straddles a pool of deadly, explosive, methane gas.

Red-faced postal officials are busy explaining the situation to House investigators, and sleuths from the General Accounting Office. Probers have talked with the builder, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Engineers point the finger of blame at the U.S. Postal Service, which picked the location.

Capitol Hill sources say only \$750 was spent for a "ground survey" report, and that the real estate deal was handled by a retired postal official acting as a "consultant." The project is supposed to handle packages and newspapers bound for greater New York City and Europe. The 100-acre site is located in Secaucus, N.J., about six miles from New York City.

GAO began its study of the Secaucus situation at the request of Rep. H. R. Gross (R-Iowa). Its 50-page confidential report went to Congress earlier this month. Conclusions of the report are that the Postal Service did not follow "adequate" guidelines in selecting design firms, and that it picked the site on the basis of "insufficient" data.

Government engineers have told Congress that the only way to rid the facility of the gas is to construct an elaborate system of tunnels underneath it, allowing the gas to escape. Methane, or marsh gas, is highly explosive and could be set off by a match or spark from a welder's torch.

Investigators who have been on the scene say the gas was first spotted by workmen who noticed bubbles coming up from pools under, and around, the building which is partially built on pilings.

**Rep. Robert N.C. Nix's (D-Pa.)** Postal Operations unit has Secaucus building, and other postal construction projects.

Union leaders who have gotten wind (no pun intended) of the gas situation say they would fight any shift of employees to the site, until the air is cleared.

A spokesman for the U.S. Postal Service had this comment about the Secaucus facility:

"The U.S. Postal Service has been aware for some time of the potential for methane gas accumulations at the site. The Corps of Engineers which is responsible for completion of the project has been and is taking steps to eliminate any possibility of an accumulation of gas under the building.

"This has been accomplished by installing a system of ventilating pipes which effectively prevents significant building up of gas under the building slab. It should be noted that methane gas accumulations are typical in the meadowlands of northern New Jersey."

Regarding the use of a former postal official as real estate consultant, the Service said:

"Mr. Ormond A. Kieb was formerly an assistant postmaster general in the Bureau of Facilities and is a well-recognized real estate consultant in New Jersey who was retained as a consultant to participate in our site selection."

**Foreign Service Promotions:** State Department officials say they've injected more youth in this year's selection boards, which are meeting to determine who gets promoted. Class three, four and five selection boards now in session are said to be made up mostly of people in the same grade ranges (that is within two grades) as those whose qualifications they are studying.

**John H. Conlin**, formerly a top legal man at Federal Communications Commission, has joined the Postal Rate Commission. He'll be assistant general counsel for its regulation division.

**Federally Employed Women**, the equal sex group, meets for a buffet dinner session Nov. 17 at the Foreign Service Club. Call 548-8547 for reservations.

**John Finlator**, deputy director of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs will retire Jan. 1. The Justice official has 36 years of federal service.

**Computer Programmer:** Li-ching R. Peng, 25, has been paid \$12,615 to \$16,404. Call 426-5601.

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